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ABSTRACT

To keep up with the tempo of the 20th century and to further its plans for service in 1980, the Natrona County Public Library initiated full time, regular use of a cable television channel in 1971. The instantaneous character of televised communication provided a stimulant for developing rapid information retrieval techniques covering broad bases of information. High speed microfilm equipment was acquired as a first approach to this goal. To fully meet the goal, a computerized index of all traditional reference tools, a microfilm retrieval system, a videotape library, a computerized data base, and cable television communication with library patrons would be added. (PF)

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The NCPL Scene - 1980
Script for Video Tape

In the early 1900's the concepts surrounding public libraries were fairly well accepted by the librarian, the user, and the non-user. Virtually, everyone knew where the library was and what it did or did not do. At that time, the concept of public libraries was "to provide the common man with access to cultural and up-lifting literature." Recent articles have shown that much of the public library's history is characterized as a tradition of the white man's burden. It was the responsibility of the upper classes to provide libraries to assist the many immigrants in the process of assimilation into the mainstream of American life. During those times the tempo of the library was relatively slow paced. For someone to use the library, it was necessary for them to appear in person. Finding the materials and using the materials took a great deal of time, but then time was not as valuable as it is now. You still had time to spend in the library, the pool hall, the bar, at church, or the various other places where people congregated. News was slow in reaching many areas, particularly in the western parts of the country. The tempo of business life was relatively easy. The image of the library has certainly been stereotyped from those days. There are still many libraries which are operating under the same philosophy. In the 1950's libraries began to explore different methods of serving the patron. And some change in philosophies have developed. The need for the public library has changed significantly. The dramatic increase in funds for education through all levels of schooling have decreased the need for informal education through the public library. It has altered the type of informal education that libraries need to provide. In instances where community colleges provide classes on virtually anything, it should no longer be the libraries province to teach. We should in no way compete with other educational institutions. In fact, I even question whether a public library is an educational institution. Public libraries should compete with other community organizations. The provision of information services is a unique function of a public library. It is a function that we are the best suited institution in the community to provide. We should emphasize information that will help the people live better and information that will enable people to cope better with today's society. In 1971, the Natrona County Public Library took a major step in the development of providing information services. On February 15, 1971, NCPL initiated the first full time regular use of a Cable Television channel by a public library. The Natrona County Public Library has been using cable Channel 12 to provide answers to reference questions, to telecast library story programs, to telecast the public forum, to do special programs, like Halloween and Christmas, to communicate with groups, such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Mental Health Association, and to be a person to person visual communication tool with 70% of the community. It was important for our cable television to relate to the roles and the functions of the library. Therefore, our use of it has remained within that context.

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We've found a problem though, television is an instant media. We receive national news simultaneously all over the country. The resignation of President Nixon was known immediately after it happened throughout the entire country. When people turn on television, they expect to see something happening. Television telescopes time. When we look at how many major medical problems are solved in an hour, how the west was civilized in a series, and the many other programs which show events happening quickly in rapid succession and coming to a happy ending, we can see this effect. This concept of doing things rapidly is out of place in a library setting. Most libraries still operate under the assumption that a person locating information has hours, days, even weeks to wait. Too much of our research or information is designed with the idea that a person is writing a term paper and that if they tell us far enough ahead of time, we can locate the information that they need. This works well in academic libraries. In a public library, it alienates patrons. To fully use cable television in public library systems, we must develop rapid information retrieval techniques covering broad bases of information. Cable television is not the only reason for doing this. All libraries will be required to do this in order to survive. Cable television provides a stimulant.

At the Natrona County Public Library we have been discussing and considering this problem for quite some time. The final solution probably is not known at this point. But we must find that solution and, here, we are making the beginnings towards that solution. We have high speed microfilm equipment to develop the methods and the systems of storing and retrieving information for the elected officers of Natrona County. This project was funded separately by the County Commissioners. The microfilm, which is familiar to most librarians, will give us the capability of capturing our own information or reformating other people's information so that we may quickly access it. This project has given us the equipment and the personnel to develop the system for information retrieval for the offices of the elected officials. We can apply the same systems and technology to our operation here at the library. Microfilm is coming of age, it no longer is an archival storage medium. It is a system for handling current information quickly. The low cost of microfilm and microfiche units will be a major break through. Public libraries have traditionally not captured information about their community or their locality in a systematic fashion. We have had to rely upon printed material from publishers and other sources. An item which comes from the local Chamber of Commerce becomes a deviation, if we are to utilize it in the normal methods. But its very important for a public library to have the capability of generating, capturing, and storing local information. Microfilm will give us this capability. As a part of that project, which is called the county records system, funds were made available to lease a computer. The computer will be used to index microfilm at a very sophisticated level. This same technique can be applied to the normal operations of the library and eventually the library will be able to locate any item in its possession, the status of that item, and see that it gets into the hands of the person needing it very quickly. The entire library could be placed into a computer on disc files, but this would be very expensive. Selected types of information, which could be selected by the computer, based on usage, can be stored into ready access files. By taking four tools, the Natrona County

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Public Library can provide a true rapid information retrieval system for the man on the street, John Doe. The four elements are:

1) The traditional library tools, such as books, magazines, documents, and vertical file which will be indexed and inventoried by the computer so that we know what we have and where it is.

2) Microfilm retrieval system that we can use to save space where it is needed with traditional materials. We can also use this to provide a standardized format for such items as the vertical file, local historical materials, or the records of other county agencies. We can use the retrieval units to give us rapid access to the microfilm holdings.

3) Videotape. Videotape gives public libraries the ability to capture local events, to create their own information, and then to telecast it or show it inhouse for the user. We are now converting our videotape file, which we have generated ourselves, into 1/2" video cartridges, which will be available for telecast on demand or viewing in-house. Videotape will replace much of the 16mm film and other traditional media currently available since it is much more flexible to use and it allows local interpretation.

4) The computer. With such a complex and diverse data base it requires a computer to maintain control over the data base and to do the housekeeping chores required to assure that this data base can be used by the public. In addition the computer may provide retrieval for high activity items which the computer itself will determine.

The Natrona County Public Library in 1980 will probably look just about the same as it does now. Our new wing, dedicated last September, will probably have not changed. The change will occur internally, where the staff will have at their command all of the tools available from the 20th century technology to bring the library's resources to bear on any individual's problems. Picture if you will a librarian at a work station which has a microfiche cartridge retrieval unit, a computer cathode ray terminal, three videotape cartridge units, and, within easy reach, the rest of the library's resources. This reference work will not lower the status of the reference librarian. It will make their status much more meaningful because they will be able to provide information which is more relevant to the user. The use of cable television to communicate with this user will also be an important part. Any of the tools available to the reference librarian will be interfaced with the cable television system. The librarian will have four options for locating the information: the microfilm, the traditional media, the computer, and the videotape. And in order to answer the question the reference librarian will have three modes of communications: in person, the telephone, and cable television.

Cable television is like the other tools, we should take its capabilities to assist library operations and utilize this capability to enhance the library. We should not attempt to compete with commercial

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television or national networks for the publics attention. Programming for cable television, or commercial television, or radio can be a very exciting area for librarians to become involved, but it must be remembered that we are to provide information, not entertainment. And that the resources required to provide entertainment on a major scale are too far above those of local libraries or state libraries. Possibly national library networks could accomplish this, but I think this would be leading us down the wrong road. We need to use cable television as a tool for communications to transmit information to a person who has requested it, or as a public relations tool for the library itself.